



2007 – 2008 School Year Report



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September 2008

Dear Reader,

This is the first End of School Year Report generated by the Office of the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman is an independent professional problem resolution office created by Mayor Adrian Fenty and the Council of the District of Columbia. Individuals seeking help resolving problems in public charter schools, District of Columbia Public Schools and the University of the District of Columbia can use the services of the Ombudsman.



Tonya Vidal Kinlow, Ombudsman

An important part of the Ombudsman's work is to identify trends and potential problem areas impacting particular schools or the entire system. The End of School Year Report is a summary of the types of issues that the Ombudsman office responded to during its first seven months of operation. It includes summary and analysis, as well as recommendations on ways that the public education systems can address consistent areas of concern.

In our effort to increase public awareness of public school issues, the Ombudsman issues monthly reports to the Mayor, the Council and District residents. You can sign up to get copies of these reports by calling our office at (202) 741-8777, going to our web site at www.ombudsman.dc.gov or stopping by or sending a letter to our office at 825 North Capitol Street, NE, Suite 5002, Washington, DC 20002.

Tonya Vidal Kinlow

Office of the Ombudsman 2008 End of School Year Report

The law establishing the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education mandates development and distribution of monthly reports, as well as an end of the school year report. Each report provides real-time data to public education leaders about the types of issues public school families are experiencing in the schools. This is the first end of the school year report developed by the office since it began operation in December 2007. The report contains comprehensive trend analysis and a report of Ombudsman activity from December 2007 through June 2008.

As a start-up operation, the Ombudsman established the office operations from the ground up, including identifying and equipping an office, identifying and hiring staff, and developing and implementing standard operating procedures. At the same time, the Ombudsman responded to inquiries from 433 individuals in its first seven months. Of those cases, the Ombudsman staff closed 325 by June 30, and had 104 pending completion. The average time to close the cases was 23 days. The top five issues were all student-related:

- Administrative – includes issues such as transcript requests, grade disputes, transportation, enrollment and school transfers
- Student Safety – includes issues such as bullying, fights, verbal threats
- Special Education – includes requests for help getting assessments and services
- Suspension and Truancy – includes requests for help on suspension, expulsion and truancy
- Communication – includes reports of miscommunication and failed communication

In early reports, the Ombudsman identified several areas in public education system processes that school leaders must improve to insure the success of the overall school reform effort. These issues surfaced during the investigation and resolution of individual problems as needing potentially systemic reform:

- treatment of chronic absences and truancy
- use of long term suspension and its impact on truancy
- parents' use of home schooling as a way to avoid disciplinary actions
- suspension policies and special education students
- responsiveness to request for special education assessments and/or supports
- student transfers to alternative education institutions
- student transfers from charter schools to DC Public Schools
- student safety, bullying, and school environment
- responsiveness of human resources to personnel problems

The law also requires the Ombudsman to provide outreach to residents and serve as a vehicle for citizens to communicate their concerns regarding public education. Through its interaction with the public in more than 80 public events, the Ombudsman documented and offered data-driven

recommendations on the above-mentioned and other issues identified while working with the public. This report summarizes those activities and results of the work of the Office of the Ombudsman since it began operation.

Summary of Case Activity: December 2007 to June 2008

The Office of the Ombudsman is authorized to respond to cases that arise from the three public education sectors in the District, DC public schools (DCPS), public charter schools (PCS) and the University of the District of Columbia (UDC). Table 1 shows the number of cases the Ombudsman received by public education sector. A significant majority of the cases, 341, were about DCPS. There were 76 charter school cases and 11 cases from UDC. In addition, the Ombudsman received 5 cases about education issues in private and other school environments.

There are two likely reasons for the large number of DCPS-related cases. Currently, DCPS is the largest public education sector with 49,442 students as compared to the 21,583¹ students in Charter schools. Secondly, DCPS has included information about the Ombudsman services on its web site and in other publications. The Ombudsman will target future outreach activities to charter school and university parents, students and faculty.

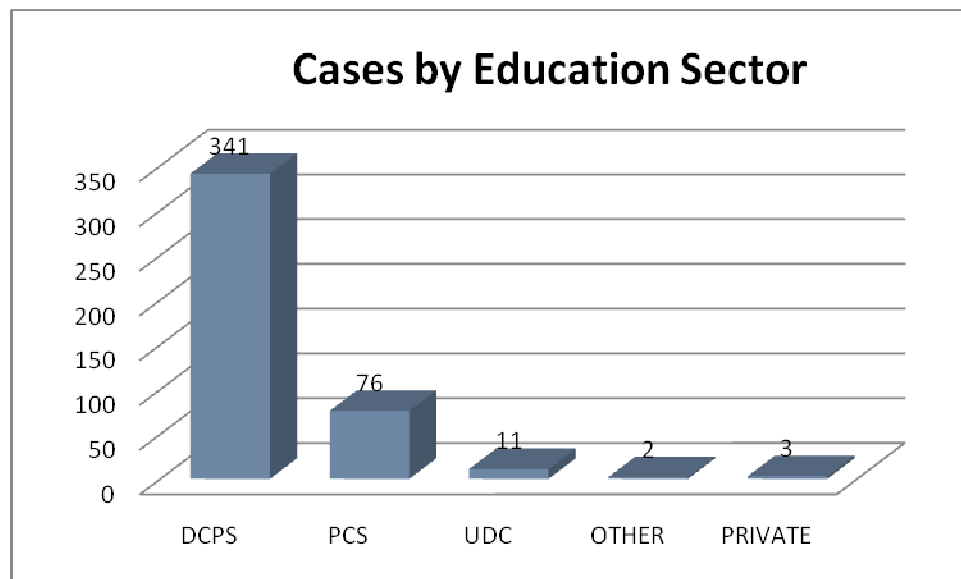


Figure 1 – Number of Individual Cases by Education Sector

Overall, student-related issues represented 83 percent of types of cases that the Ombudsman addressed. 16 percent of the issues were personnel-related. In 104 instances, individuals contacted the Ombudsman to help them address administrative problems with the public schools. Typical in these types of cases were requests for help finding transcripts. The consistency of

¹ 2007 Annual Public School Enrollment Audit, Office of the State Superintendent

these requests points to the need for the development of an electronic tracking system or a centralized warehouse of all public school records older than seven years. The Ombudsman will work with the Office of the State Superintendent for Education to address this problem when it implements the state longitudinal education data warehouse (SLED).

	Issue Code	Frequency	Percent of All Cases
Student 83%	Suspension/Truancy	42	10%
	Safety	75	17%
	Special Ed	49	11%
	Other	28	7%
	Medical	10	2%
	Communication	53	12%
	Administrative	104	24%
Personnel 16%	Safety	8	2%
	Other	8	2%
	Pay/Benefits	21	5%
	Termination	13	3%
	Administrative	19	4%
Charter Applicant 1%	Charter Application Denied	3	1%

Table 1 – Issue Frequency and Percent of All Cases

Figure 2 shows the frequency of each issue as a percentage of the total cases. The data includes issues from all three public education sectors. It highlights the dominance of student-related concerns brought by individuals contacting the Ombudsman about. Other than administrative issues, safety (17%), communication (12%) and special education (11%) top the concerns. Over the seven-month data collection period, student suspension and truancy, including expulsion, made up 10 percent of the issues.

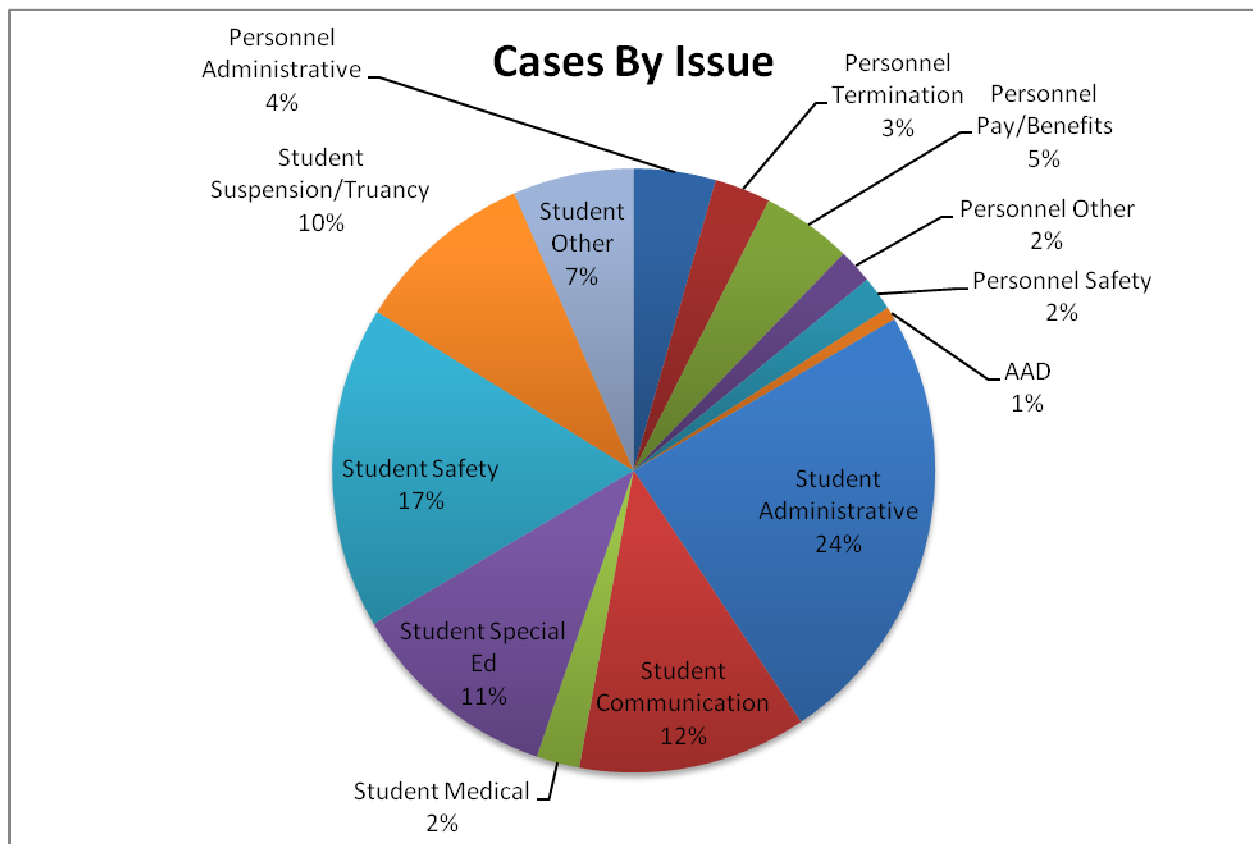


Figure 2—Frequency of Issues in Cases

Figure 3 focuses only on the student-related issues from all three education sectors. The data highlights the importance of sound administration on student and campus safety. It also shows the need for effectively implemented policies and procedures on safety, and communications between staff and parents. When looking only at cases involving students, safety issues represent 21 percent of those cases. Communication is an issue in 15 percent of the student cases, and is a correlated factor with other issues, such as special education, safety and suspension. For example, in many suspension cases parents report that they never received notice of the suspension. Parents also indicate confusion about when their child can return to school. In cases involving long-term suspension, many parents who contact the Ombudsman report that they were unaware of the opportunity to challenge the decision. Public school officials will address these types of communications issues by making sure public school staffs follow the protocols established to notify families about the nature and length of the suspension, as well as the right to appeal certain suspensions.

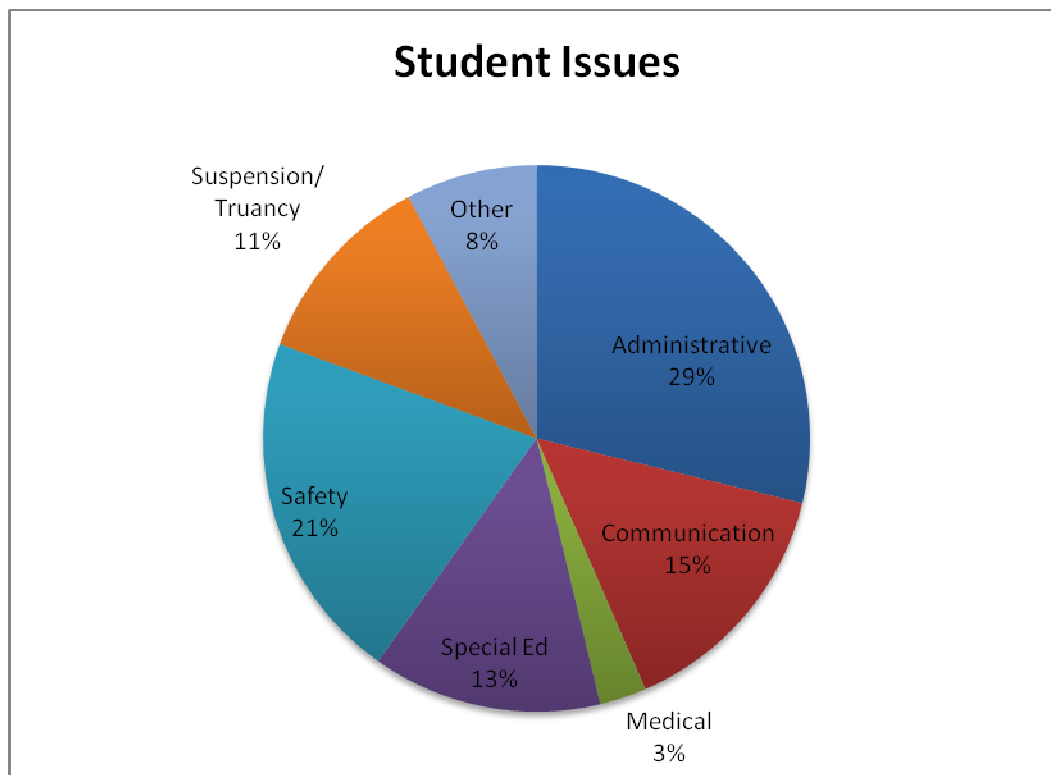


Figure 3 – Frequency of Issues as a Percent of All Student Cases

Medical issues represented 10 cases total and only 3 percent of all student contacts. These cases usually involve students who cannot attend school for medical reasons and receive educational services through the DCPS Visiting Instruction Program (VIS). According to the program brochure, it is “designed to provide an instructional program that is cognizant to the medical factors related to the disability, the health impairment indicated and/or the need for special accommodations; and a continuous, individualized education program closely related to the student’s regular school program.” However, in medical issues cases brought to the Ombudsman, parents expressed concern about the consistency of the program’s services.

Two problems identified through Ombudsman intervention are the process that VIS instructors use to assess and grade student performance given the medical condition and the process used to report those assessments to the student's home school. The school district will evaluate the standard operating procedures in the VIS program to ensure the staff is implementing the objectives of the program. The program will revise its procedures to include regular reporting of student progress/performance directly to the students and their family, similar to the progress reports and report cards issued to students in regular education programs.

Figure 4 shows a breakdown of cases involving public school personnel in all three education sectors. Pay and benefits issues made up 30 percent of all personnel-related cases. The problems ranged from getting the right amount of pay after a promotion to the school administration terminating medical benefits while the staff person is on medical leave. Personnel pay and benefits issues are among the most difficult to resolve. The cases involve a significant amount of documentation that must be completely accurate to make it through a complex process involving multiple approvals from different parts of the human resource, finance, and administrative operations. High staff turnover and heavy caseloads within DCPS human resources and limited, multi-tasked staff in charter school operations result in long delays in responding to Ombudsman requests for intervention. These cases took an average of 37 days to close as opposed to the average 23 days for all other cases.

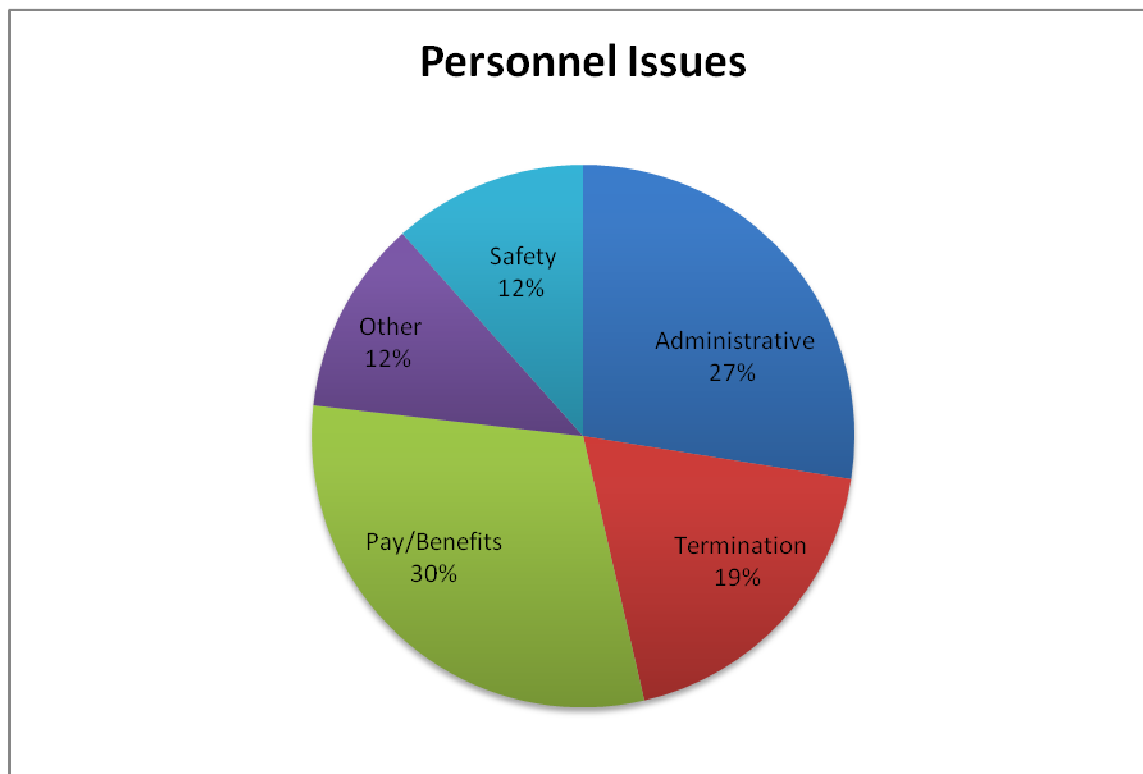


Figure 4 – Frequency of Issues by Percent of All Personnel Cases

Monthly Trend Analysis

This section of the report shows the occurrence trends of student-related issues on a monthly basis. In each issue area, the first chart shows all student-related cases, the other two show DCPS-specific and charter school specific data respectively. The data provides a clear picture of the consistency of each issue, which helps to highlight a potential pattern of systemic problems. Analyzing these trends based on monthly occurrence could also help public education officials prepare a proactive response to potential problem. Since this data is the first monthly trend analysis based on Ombudsman activity, it will serve as a baseline to determine if public schools make improvements by developing responses to these highlighted trends.

Student Administrative Issues Analysis

The Office of the Ombudsman saw a consistent increase in student administrative cases after a sharp decline in January as shown in Figure 5. By April, the number of administrative cases reached its peak. The trend in DCPS student administrative cases, shown in Figure 5A parallels the overall trend with the highest number of administrative cases in April – most related to high school graduation. Figure 5B shows that public charter school student administrative cases peaked in March and April. Many of the charter school issues included problems with school transfers and concerns about graduation. In the cases brought to the Ombudsman involving transfers from charter schools to DCPS, transferring student information and aligning courses from DCPS complicated resolution of those cases.

Several cases highlighted significant issues in the process that public school staff use to document and inform students and parents of graduation status. One of these cases involved a student who needed one class to graduate. The school counselor had not documented the missing class and scheduled the student as a half-day student throughout senior year. By the time the school recognized the error, the student could not make up the class in time to participate in June 2008 graduation ceremonies. The student had to attend summer school to complete the course requirement and graduated in August. Several other students in this same school and in other schools had course scheduling problems that impacted their participation in the traditional graduation. The problem suggests the need for counselor training, as well as a review of the process used to notify students and parents about graduation status.

DCPS conducted a comprehensive review of all high school student schedules during the 2007-2008 school years. As a result, the school district was able to send out all senior high school student schedules before school started in August 2008. DCPS is committed to conducting continuous evaluation of student transcripts to insure class placements advance graduation goals.

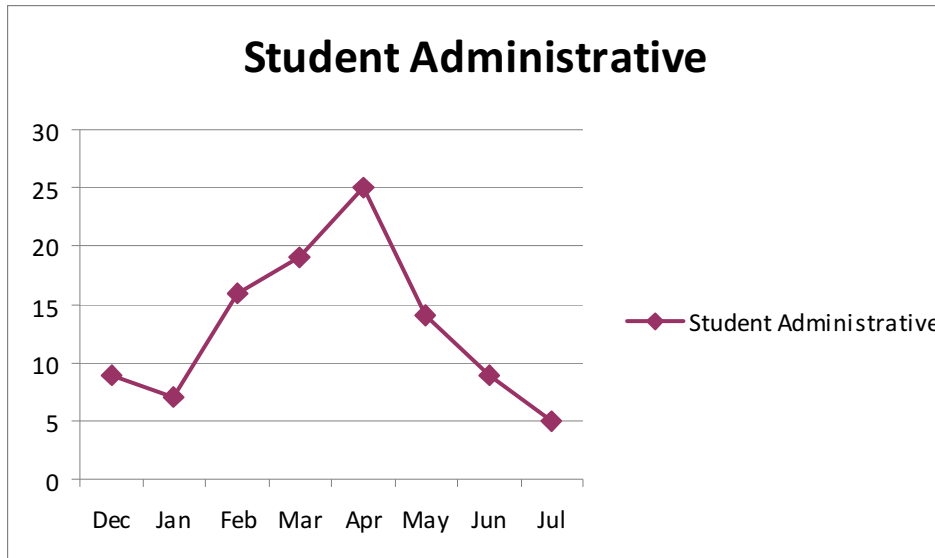


Figure 5 – Monthly Trend Analysis of all Student Administrative Cases

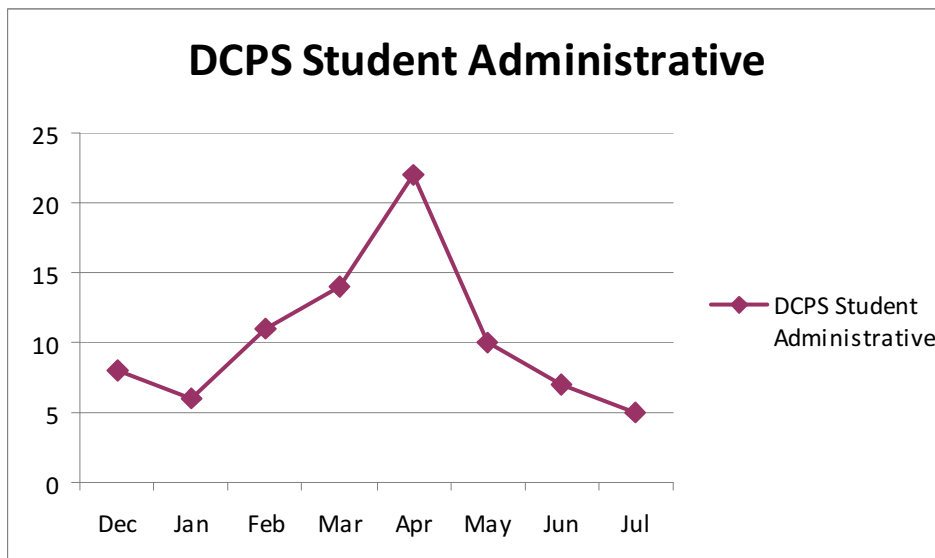


Figure 5A – Monthly Trend Analysis of DCPS Student Administrative Cases

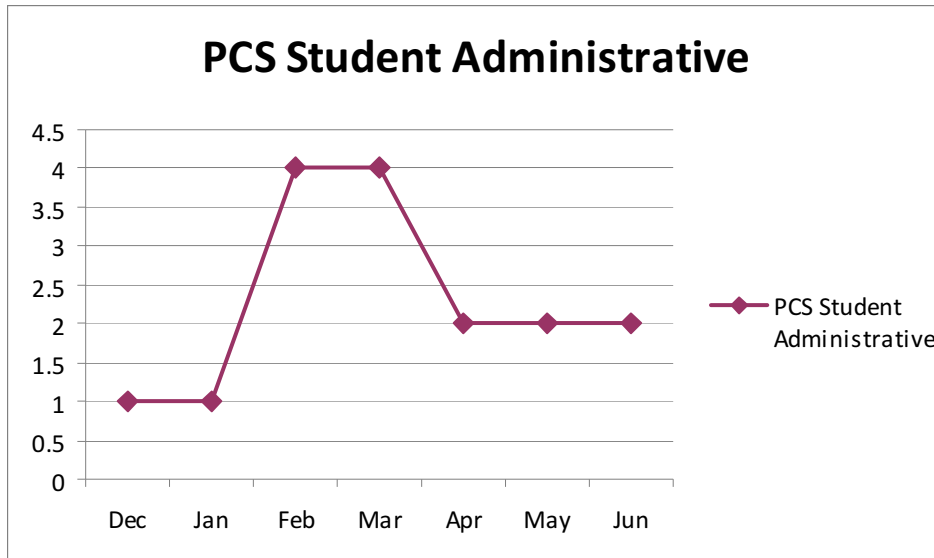


Figure 5B – Monthly Trend Analysis of PCS Student Administrative Cases

Student Safety

Figure 6 shows the monthly trend in student safety-related cases. For all education sectors, the number of cases involving safety issues increased consistently from February to May. The number of DCPS safety cases reported to the Ombudsman showed an increase in February and a slight decline in March. DCPS safety cases increased again in April and May as shown in Figure 6A. Charter school safety cases represent a significantly smaller number of all safety cases. The trend, as shown in Figure 6B, is a consistent ebb and flow from month to month, caused primarily by the low frequency of safety cases reported by charter school families.

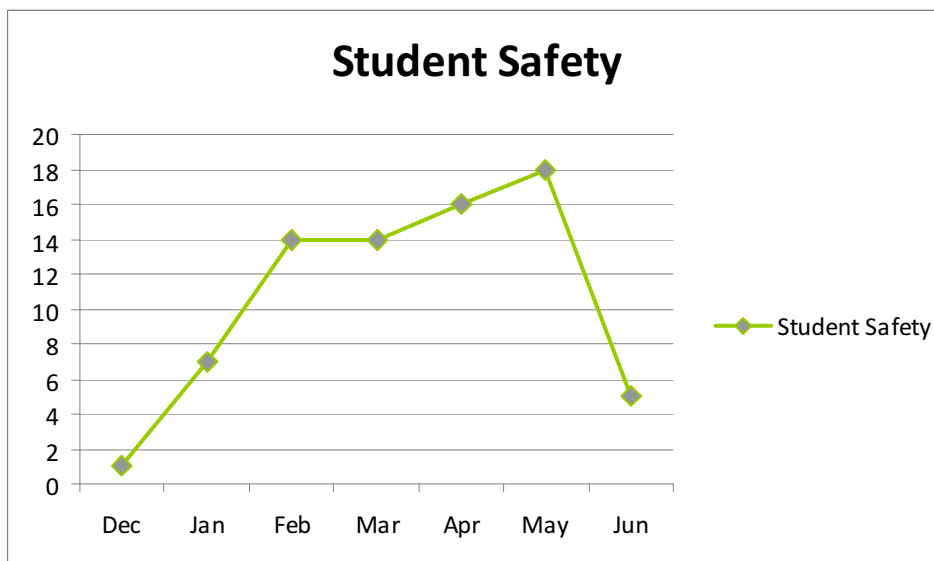


Figure 6 – Monthly Trend Analysis of Student Safety Cases

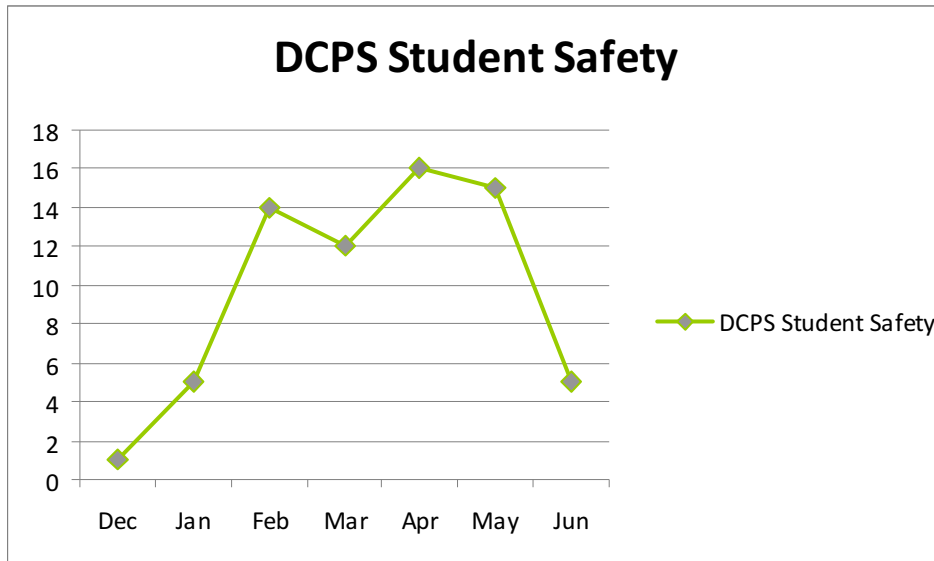


Figure 6A – Monthly Trend Analysis of DCPS Student Safety Cases

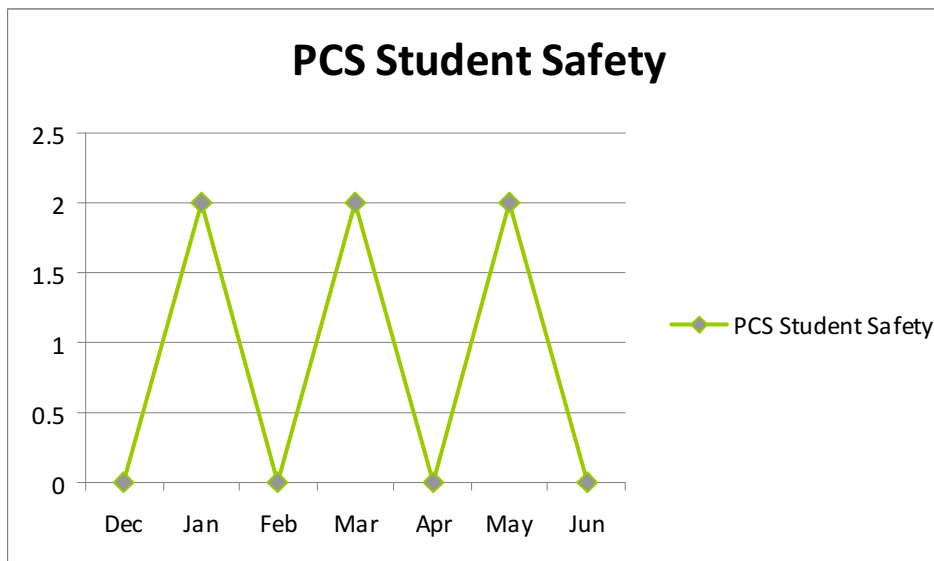


Figure 6B – Monthly Trend Analysis of PCS Student Safety Cases

Special Education

Following a drop in cases in January, Figure 7 shows a consistent rise in requests for help resolving special education issues as the school year progressed. In the first months of Ombudsman operation, December 2007 and January 2008, parents called for help getting assessments. In the later months, the cases focused more on parents asking for help getting the school to address concerns about special education needs. In Figure 7A and Figure 7B, the pattern shows that in both DCPS and charter schools there was a spike in special education cases one month and a drop the following month.

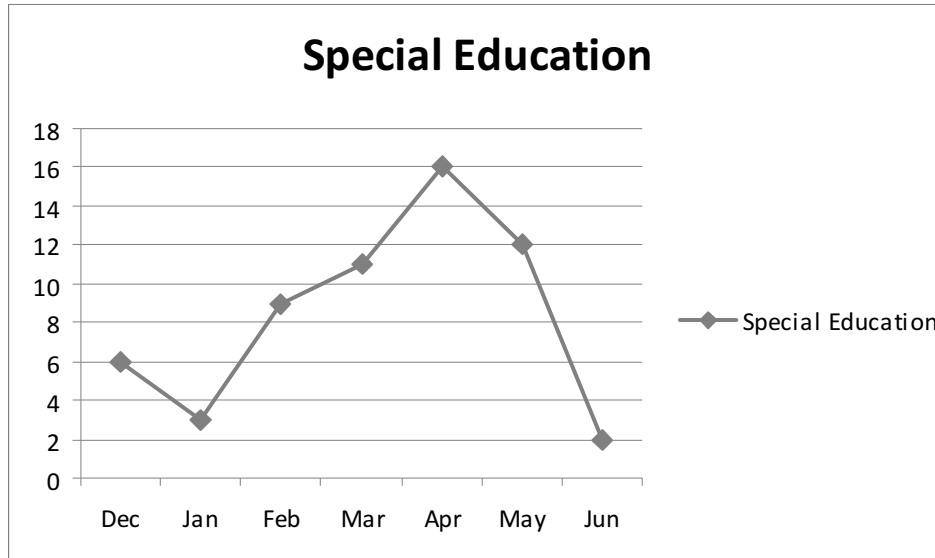


Figure 7 – Monthly Trend Analysis of Special Education Cases

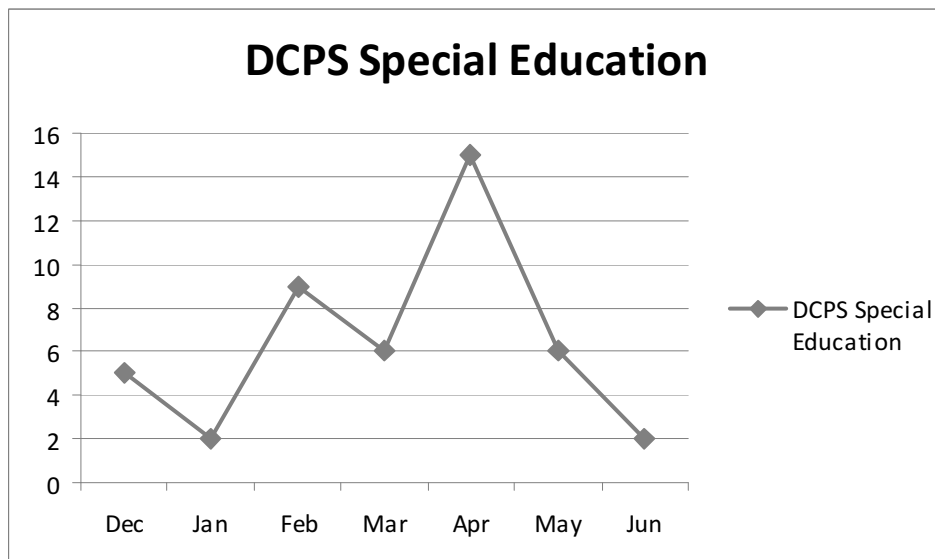


Figure 7A- Monthly Trend Analysis of DCPs Special Education Cases

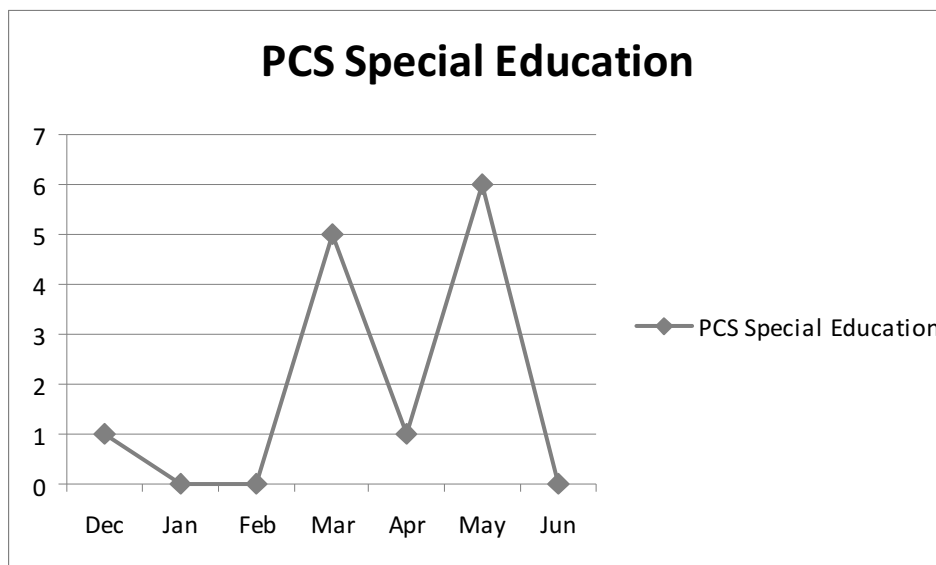


Figure 7B – Monthly Trend Report of PCS Special Education Cases

Student Suspension, Expulsion and Truancy

Figure 8 details monthly frequency of all suspension, expulsion and truancy data. A review of the case files history shows that the Ombudsman received most of the truancy-related cases in December, January and February. A similar review of the case files, show an increase in the overall suspension and expulsion activity in February and May in all education sectors. The corresponding education sector related graph Figure 8A shows that suspension and expulsion activity increased for DCPS in February. Most of these cases involved suspensions. Charter schools activity reported in Figure 8B shows an increase in suspension and expulsion activity in May.

Many of the charter school cases in May involved expulsion. In one instance, a group of 20 or more students were involved in a mock gang fight. The group planned to tape the incident and post it on YouTube. The charter school expelled several of the students involved in the incident. Following the expulsion notice, which came less than a month from the close of the school year, parents who contacted the Ombudsman did not get any support from the school on how to make sure the students could complete the school year. The Ombudsman worked with DCPS administrators to help students secure placements in neighborhood public schools and with the Office of the State Superintendent for Education to register students for home schooling. This case highlights the need to develop an improved tracking and transitioning process for students who must transfer involuntarily between local education systems, including clarifying rules and procedures for both parents and staff at the local school level.

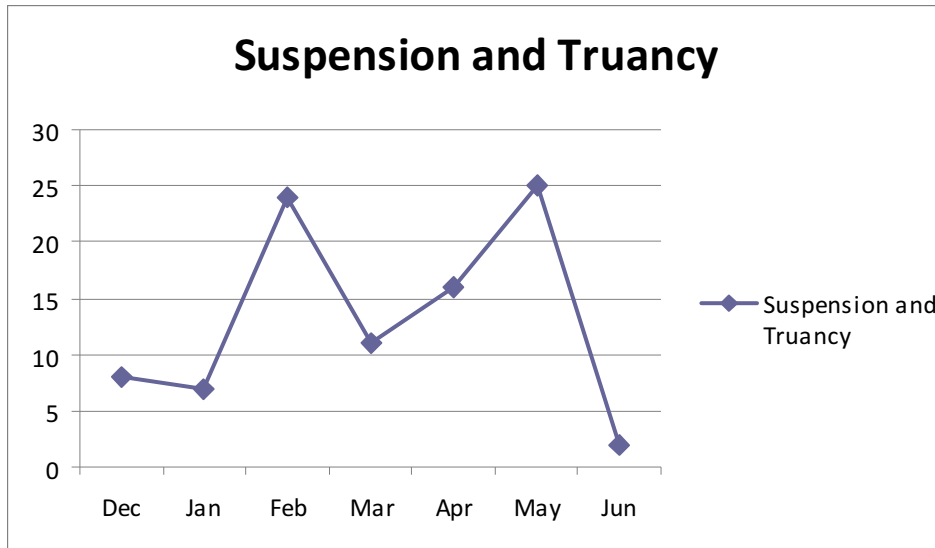


Figure 8 – Monthly Trend Report of Student Suspension, Expulsion and Truancy

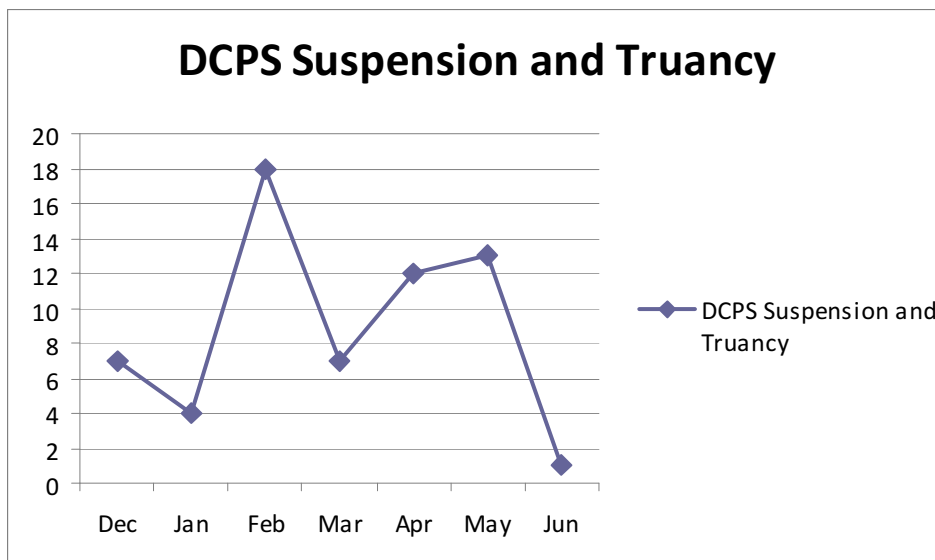


Figure 8A – Monthly Trend Report of DCPS Suspension, Expulsion and Truancy

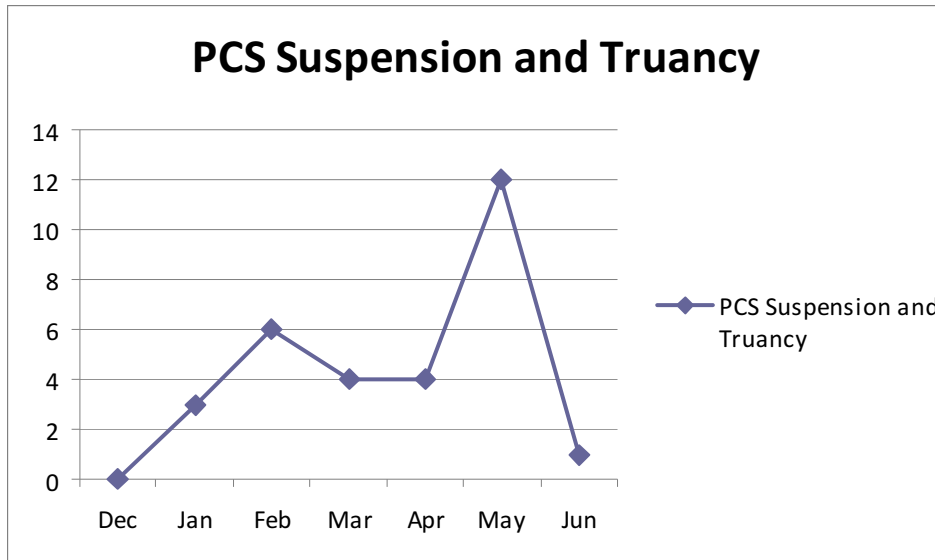


Figure 8B – Monthly Trend Report of PCS Suspension, Expulsion and Truancy

Compilation of Ombudsman Recommendations and Responses

During the course of its investigations, the Ombudsman identified several systemic problems that if left unaddressed could hamper the success of the District's school reform initiative. Some of the problems had a direct impact on a child's access to a free, quality public education. The following is a list of recommendations from the Ombudsman to public education officials in Public Charter Schools and District of Columbia Public Schools on these issues.

Chronic Absences and Truancy

- To address chronic absences and truancy, the Ombudsman recommended that public schools conduct a comprehensive assessment of the process used to collect and report attendance data and provide staff training on effective procedures.
 - Through the Interagency Collaboration and Services Integration Commission (ICSIC), coordinated by the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) DCPS agreed to work with the Office of the Chief Technology Officer to improve systems to capture accurately real-time attendance and truancy data. ICSIC members agreed to this action item in September 2007, several months before the Ombudsman began operation.
 - At the March 20, 2008 ICSIC meeting, DCPS, DME and the Public Charter School Board (PCSB) agreed to develop plan for how to deal with individual schools with high truancy as well as continue to improve truancy data collection and attendance entry.

Suspension and Truancy

- To address issues that arise from suspensions and truancy, the Ombudsman recommended that public schools evaluate suspension policies, streamline transfer processes to alternative schools, and develop a comprehensive policy on home schooling.
 - Through the ICSIC, the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council agreed to develop strategies to reduce high school truancy. DCPS agreed to create a re-entry process for students transitioning from Court Social Services and Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS). ICSIC members agreed to this action item in September 2007, several months before the Ombudsman began operation.
 - The DYRS, the Office of the State Superintendent for Education (OSSE), DCPS and the PCSB agreed to develop a proposal for alternative and transition programs for chronically truant and suspended students.
 - DCPS administrators are revising Chapter 25, the current student disciplinary policy. Several charter school leaders also indicated that their schools would be revising the student disciplinary policies.
 - OSSE developed a policy on home schooling.

Special Education and Suspension

- To insure that special education students get the required supports during suspensions, the Ombudsman recommended that charter schools establish an alternative school site for long-term suspensions.

- The Ombudsman presented the recommendation to the Executive Director of the PCSB and to charter school administrative officers.

Facilitating Student Transitions between School Systems

- To insure that families make easy transitions when transferring from one public education sector to another, the Ombudsman recommended that public school officials improve communications to families and train staff on how the process should work.
 - DCPS issued a directive to all school principals explaining the process to enroll a student transferring from a charter school.
 - The Ombudsman presented the recommendation to the Executive Director of the PCSB and to charter school administrative officers

Student Safety and Public School Environment

- To improve student safety and public school environment, the Ombudsman recommended training for all school staff on early intervention strategies; the establishment of clearly defined processes for school-based staff to notify parents and central administrators about the problems, and an increase in the use of peer mediators.
 - Through the ICSIC, the DME is providing evidence-based training to school-based staff, including School Resource Officers and school administrators, focused on appropriate school-based policing practices and promoting safe school environments. Over the summer, the Ombudsman worked with DCPS staff to provide training on student mediation and conflict resolution techniques.

Bullying

- To reduce incidents of bullying, the Ombudsman recommended staff training in early identification and intervention strategies; including acknowledging bullying behavior before it escalates to harmful physical abuse and target corrective actions for the student causing the problem.
 - DCPS is working with several city agencies on bullying reduction initiatives, such as providing a point of contact at each school and the creation of a bullying hotline.
 - DCPS conducted trainings on peer mediation and improving school climate. DCPS and the Office of the Ombudsman will conduct discussion groups with middle and senior high school students on strategies for resolving conflict without violence.

Employee Pay and Benefits

- To improve responsiveness to employee pay and benefits problems, the Ombudsman recommended that DCPS assess existing processes and reduce the number of transactions needed to fix these problems.
 - DCPS continues to implement reforms within its Human Resources Department, and has established strict accountability measures to improve performance.

Updates and Progress of the Office of the Ombudsman

Community Outreach Activity

The Ombudsman is engaged in an aggressive community outreach plan. Since January, the staff has participated in over 80 public meetings, including PTA, ANC, civic association and festivals. Ombudsman representatives use these forums to inform the public about the office and its work in the community. Local newspapers, including the *Washington Post*, *Los Tiempos* and *East of the River* as well as on radio and television reported information about the Office of the Ombudsman. District of Columbia Public Schools television developed and ran a public service announcement about the Office of the Ombudsman. In an effort to meet the public where it seeks supports, Ombudsman staff met with constituent service representatives and community service organizations. Residents can pick up flyers about the Ombudsman in each of the family strengthening collaborative organization offices, public libraries, churches, schools and health clinics. The public can find monthly reports on the Ombudsman's activities on the Mayor's public education link at www.dc.gov and at www.ombudsman.dc.gov.

Other Services and Supports

In addition to problem resolution, the Office of the Ombudsman provides other services and supports.

Mediation

Two members of the Ombudsman staff are professionally-trained mediators. Mediation is a voluntary method of conflict resolution that involves third parties as neutrals. The mediator helps individuals in a dispute discuss their differences and finds solutions that satisfy all involved. The Ombudsman provides information on mediation services to visitors who seek resolution to education-related issues.

For example, mediation is an important tool in cases involving miscommunication. In these cases, it is important that participants hear what each party has to say and that the meeting remains focused on developing a solution. When Ombudsman staff used mediation in problem resolution, the results have included apologies from both parents and school personnel, accepting a student back into school, changing a student's classroom placement and improved school environments for both students and teachers. Mediation does not always work. The result is a decision by one or both parties to move into a formal investigation process. In all cases, both the parent and the school appreciated having the neutral third party present to bring fairness to the process for both sides.

Family Team Meetings

A family team meeting (FTM) is an intervention and group process used with families who seek support from the Ombudsman for education-related problems driven by deeper-rooted issues needing immediate attention. FTM is a strength-based and family centered approach. The process involves bringing the family, extended family and community support groups together to focus on resolving the educational issue. The coordinated forum creates a culturally competent decision making environment. Convening this focused, culturally competent group allows the

family to put an action plan together that helps them address the deep rooted issues standing in the way of educational progress. After the family team creates a plan, the school-based counselor or social worker monitors the plan and revisits it in six months to assess progress and determine whether the group needs to reconvene to make changes necessary for continued growth.

Prejudice Reduction and Unity Building Workshops

The NCBI prejudice reduction and unity-building workshop consists of a series of incremental, participatory activities encouraging empathetic understanding of difference and empowering individuals of all ages and backgrounds to take leadership in building inclusive environments. The workshop allows participants to celebrate their similarities and differences, to recognize the misinformation they have learned about various groups (including their own), to learn about and reevaluate personal attitudes and behaviors based on the impact of prejudice and discrimination, to claim pride in their group identities, to understand the personal impact of discrimination through telling stories, and to learn hand-on tools for dealing effectively with offensive remarks and behaviors.

Future Operating Plans

The structure of the Ombudsman reports will change in the coming months. The law requires the Ombudsman to submit reports, on a monthly basis, to the Deputy Mayor for Public Education and the Chairman of the Council of the District of Columbia. Based on prior months' experience, the Ombudsman worked with the Office of the Chief Technology to build a data management system that will provide more effective data collection, tracking and trend reporting. The new system will be better adapted to the case management needs of the staff as well as provide more comprehensive data for reporting. In the future, the Ombudsman will issue reports in three time categories: monthly, quarterly and end of the school year. The monthly reports will provide general summaries of the case data collected. These short, one-to-two page documents will include general information on the types of issues raised each month. Quarterly reports will include retrospectively analyzed data to point out trends as well as case highlights. Finally, the end of the school year report will include extensive retrospective analysis of the previous year's issues and progress. The reports will form the principle instrument for public disclosure of issues and updates from the office.

Conclusion

The law creating the Ombudsman gives the office broad authority to receive, investigate, resolve and document public concerns in public education. The function serves not as a hammer, but as a light to identify systemic problems that could impede efforts by public school leaders to improve our schools. By focusing on individual experiences and tracking efforts to resolve the problems, the Ombudsman has access to important real-time data that can help the Mayor and public school officials in their efforts to develop a world-class public education system.